New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

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1955 PRODUCTIONS

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of February 7, 1955*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Southwest Corner"

Journal American
February 4, 1955

Kettle Boils But Not Plot

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE ARE several practical items in "The Southwest Corner," a new play by John Cecil Holm which opened at the Holiday Theatre last night. There is a practical black cat with yellow eyes who sits in Miss Eva LeGallienne's lap, there is a big old New England type kitchen stove with honest steam coming out of a kettle, and there is real rain pouring down outside the windows during a storm.

But this is about at far as reality goes. For there is nothing remotely authentic about either the people or situations involved in the rest of the evening.

There is a dear old Vermont lady who has been stupid enough to advertise for a companion with whom she can spend her declining years. And there is the blowsy young widow from Dedham, Mass., who gets the job.

The conditions of employment are that the employe will inherit the lady's priceless Down East farmhouse, with a fortune in antiques, and so it becomes a rather simple matter of when and by what means she will fleece the dear old doll out of house and holdings.

It takes most of two acts to tell this much, but one stays awake in the hope that it may become an ingenious murder mystery. Not at all; nothing as concise as that. The younger widow marries the caretaker, induces her employer to sell her possessions at auction and come live with her in Dedham.

She might even get away with this insidious plan but for the timely intervention of another character, whose background and utter decency will not be included in this instalment.

The whole thing is supposed to be a cloying consideration of the rock-bound family traditions of New England and the tragedies which may befall a lonely old lady.

Trouble is, neither of these situations are made very important to us: we have no great concern with this slightly unattractive farmhouse or the circumstances whereby the elderly widow winds up in same. And if she's sufficiently stupid enough to open the doors and turn the premises over to a stranger who has answered an advertisement, she's on her own.

It is always baffling to understand why anybody of Miss LeGallienne's stature should become associated with a venture of this sort; perhaps she read into it something that didn't come across the footlights last night.

But it is equally bewildering that Enid Markey should have given up her role in "Mrs. Patterson" for this part of the designing widow, or that Parker Fennelly, the beloved and successful Titus Moody of "Allen's Alley" should have chosen this as a suitable vehicle in which to return to Broadway.

"The Southwest Corner" is playing the Holiday Theatre on the southwest corner of Broadway and 47th st., and the chances are the southwest corner will soon be vacant.

"THE SOUTHWEST CORNER"

Play by John Cecil Holm, based on the novel by Mildred Walker; staged by George Schaefer; setting and lighting by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Paul McGuire; presented by John Huntington at the Holiday Theatre, February 3, 1955. The cast:

Orville Greenstead.....
Parker Fennelly
Marcia Elder....Eva LeGallienne
David Keating.....Ray Boyle
Bea Cannon.....Enid Markey
Edith Summers...Jean Gillespie
Sam Wilson.....Frank Tweddell
Hattie Carew.....Frieda Altman

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
February 4, 1955

Three Excellent Performances Help Holm's 'Southwest Corner'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Thanks to the artful playing of Eva LeGallienne, Parker Fennelly and Enid Markey—and to the roles John Cecil Holm has written for them—there is a great deal of charm in a sentimental comedy called "The Southwest Corner" which opened last evening at the Holiday Theatre. There also is humor of a gentle and whimsical sort, for in all his works the playwright has shown that he thinks people are funny just because they are people, and nothing funny has to happen to them to make them amusing.

This could be a sound idea in the theatre, but an impractical one unless the dramatist is a modern Chekhov. "The Southwest Corner" might be called a Vermont version of "The Cherry Orchard," with plenty of maple syrup. It is affectionate and observing, but in it hardly enough happens to keep its three acts in motion and its audiences in emotion.

A Schemer Moves In

In the play is an 83-year-old lady who lives in the Vermont farmhouse in which she was born. She is alone, except for the occasional services—like cutting wood and bringing it into the kitchen—of a middle-aged handyman. She wants to live out her life in this place she loves, but knows she needs care; so in a newspaper ad she offers to bequeath her place to someone who will become her companion. In moves a conniving female from Dedham, Mass., and before the old lady realizes it her household is up for auction and she seems slated to end her time in Dedham.

The villainess of this little plot—the crafty companion—isn't a real villainess, for Holm always gets so fond of the stage characters he creates that he can't bear disliking them. She is beautifully portrayed by Miss Markey, who is my favorite stage fussbudget. She simpers, primps and chatters most innocently, and all the time she is getting her own selfish way. It's a very good performance.

Touching Portrayal

A most excellent performance is being given by Miss LeGallienne. This lady, who can still do a radiant Camille, has put herself body and mind into the role of a frail, pale, wrinkled octogenarian whose determined Yankee spirit now shines only through her eyes. It is a real and touching portrayal.

Any comedy set in any place east of Westchester County is sure to have the Yankee handyman type in it. Almost all these handymen overdo their yeps and nopes and terse calvincoolidge comments, so they become caricatures. But not Parker Fennelly. In "The Southwest Corner" he is giving the most expert and most enjoyable character performance of the season. He just doesn't ever do anything wrong, and I salute him.

There are helpful minor performances by Jean Gillespie, a pretty girl; Ray Boyle, Frank Tweddell and Frieda Altman. Ralph Alswang has designed a fine old farm kitchen for the setting, and the teakettle really boils on the wood stove. George Schaefer has directed the performance with all the affection Holm put into writing his play.

Daily Mirror
February 4, 1955

'The Southwest Corner' Lacking in Depth

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Southwest Corner," John Cecil Holm has told the story of a brassy and possessive widow, who moves in on an aged and sensitive Vermont woman and, though well meaning, almost drives her to distraction. It all came about through a newspaper ad.

THE OCTOGENARIAN, fearing to be alone in her declining days, offered to deed her lovely old home over to a companion who would watch out for her until the end. Not that she was lonely, for she had her memories and family heirlooms. But she was becoming a bit infirm, and Vermont Winters are rigorous.

Soon the invader married the handyman, and began planning to run things her own way. They would all move to her bungalow in Dedham, Mass., where there were television and other excitements. They would sell off her husband's little farm and her hostess' big house with its antiques.

But the hustle and bustle attendant on the auction sale proved too much for her fluttery heart. So the handyman and the elderly lady regained some measure of peace. And the latter had the promise that two nice young people would look out for her.

• • •

HOLM HAS fashioned the play from a novel by Mildred Walker. An able craftsman, he has accurately caught the flavor of the characters, the moods of the environment, but failed to turn the material into a stage script of sufficient stature or dramatic impact.

The empty-headed widow is one of the most drab and annoying characters we've encountered in quite a spell. She not only drove her benefactor to the edge of insanity, but had us wavering there for a few minutes. Fortunately, Holm's innate sense of humor came to the rescue of all in the nick of time.

Eva LeGallienne is excellent as the intelligent and gallant diehard who got more than she bargained for from the blind ad. Enid Markey is wonderfully right as the nagging, whining, willful, though unintentional, tormentor. This is first-rate acting, for in private life Miss Markey happens to be one of the nicest and most charming people we know.

• • •

PARKER FENNELLY brings some of the wry comedy, for which he was noted on Fred Allen's radio program, to the handyman. He is really Titus Moody in Vermont, instead of Allen's Alley. Jean Gillespie and Ray Boyle are good as sympathetic young neighbors.

Producer John Huntington has given "The Southwest Corner" the advantages of George Schaefer's direction and Ralph Alswang's setting.

There is a goodly measure of merit in all Holm plays, be they hits or failures, for he is a skillful dramatist. But the Holiday Theatre's new tenant strikes us as lacking the emotional depth or, if you prefer, the entertainment value necessary to survival these days on Broadway.

New York Herald Tribune
February 4, 1955

THEATER

'The Southwest Corner'

By WALTER F. KERR

The Tarantula at Home

JOHN Cecil Holm's "The Southwest Corner," which opened at the Holiday Thursday, takes up the case of an 83-year-old widow who lives alone in her snowbound Vermont homestead. Feeling that her time and money are running short, she places a newspaper advertisement suggesting that some able-bodied companion might like to live with her during her sunset years, in return for which she will deed said companion her house and all her possessions. A companion, of course, turns up.

Normally this sort of opening is the cue for some fancy melodrama, with the old lady trapped and possibly done to death by her conniving visitor. You do more or less expect—as is once haughtily hinted in the course of the evening—that a dash of poison will be stirred in someone's crockery, or that a body will have to be disposed of before the festivities are officially closed.

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Mr. Holm has something else in mind—something higher and truer in tone, I'm afraid. It has occurred to him—or to Mildred Walker, on whose novel the play is based—that the visitor need not be an outright scoundrel in order to do the necessary dramatic damage. What if, the authors ask, the interloper were simply an intolerable, unthinking, ordinary greedy bore?

This Bea Cannon who shows up for the winter doesn't really mean to do any harm; she just naturally devours her nearest and dearest—with a dash of ketchup. She is a frowsy suburban type who likes a blaring radio, dotes on fattening her charges up with heavy apple-pies, and generally irritates them to death with her candid, nonstop conversation.

• • •

As I say, this is no doubt closer to the facts of life—and gradual death—than most theatrical adventures get. But after three acts of it—Bea Cannon droning on and on about her charitable motives, Bea Cannon speaking of herself in the third person, Bea Cannon reminding her victim how close her demise must be—you can only share the good old lady's passion for walking out in thunderstorms, and her devout hope that she will be struck by lightning.

• • •

None of this is to be taken as a criticism of Enid Markey's performance as the woman-eating, man-eating spider of the piece. Miss Markey, illustrious comedienne that she is, actually manages to make the entire first act seem rich in caustic observation. As she waves her supercilious fingers in a flight of "intellectual" conversation about Egypt, or nudges her employer into reading some pulp-magazine scandal, or rambles on about the husband who weighed 142 pounds when she married him and 201 when he died, she is downright delectable. But the play isn't really a comedy, the character isn't meant to delight us, and Mr. Holm's insistence—in acts two and three—that she become both progressively garrulous and progressively grasping robs Miss Markey of her principal charms and the rest of us of the fun we were having.

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The writing that follows isn't bad writing, or dishonest writing. But it is thin writing if we are to accept the play as a complex comment on human nature, rather than as amiable caricature or forthright melodrama. "The Southwest Corner" hasn't enough weight or richness to make dullness meaningful.

Its sketchiness as serious material leaves Eva La Galliene, dignified and gracious as an aged Vermonter, groping for some sort of sustained scene that is worth playing. With puffed-up eyes, silently busy lips, and a black silk shawl draped over her shoulders, Miss Le Gallienne putters about among her beloved flower-pots, hugs herself when she wants to hold her temper, and fondles a favorite cat with attractive simplicity. But there is no dimension in the figure the author has outlined; it is simply an unprotesting bit of bric-a-brac designed to be moved from place to place in the room.

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Parker Fennelly fares rather better in the role of a laconic, twig-dry handyman, extracting all the humor there is out of the business of eating pie with a knife or showing up in another fellow's ill-fitting suit. But here again the characterization is deceptive: funny at first, disturbingly ambiguous as things get tough. Ray Boyle and Jean Gillespie do well enough in their brief and intermittent appearances as a couple of local lovers.

Ralph Alswang's old-fashioned kitchen is a fine, warm background for the activity at hand. But the activity of "The Southwest Corner" is mostly verbal, and as insistent as the steam that pours from the real kettle on the real family stove.

The New York Times
February 4, 1955

The Theatre: Vermont Pastoral

Eva LeGallienne Stars in 'Southwest Corner'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

FROM Mildred Walker's pastoral novel, John Cecil Holm has made a tender little play, "The Southwest Corner," which opened at the Holiday Thursday evening.

It is the story of a lonely Vermont woman of 83 years who takes a city woman into her house as a companion. The arrangement is almost disastrous. The city woman gradually takes complete possession and is on the point of shipping the old lady off to the city when the final curtain comes down.

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In point of fact, that is about all that happens. But it hardly accounts for the fine quality of the play. The original novel was distinguished for the sensitivity of the characterization. Mr. Holm has managed to preserve most of it in dramatic form. "The Southwest Corner" is a drama of intangibles—of a highly cultivated old lady who finds herself trapped by an obtuse stranger; a middle-class city woman whose cruelty is unintentional, but no less painful because it seems like virtue to her; of a hired man who respects tradition and character; of the subtleties and awarenesses of living in the country.

•

In the theatre, things have to be said and done that can be left to the overtones of style in a novel. Mr. Holm's play is a little coarser than Miss Walker's novel on that account. But thanks to a perceptive performance by Eva LeGallienne as the old lady, Enid Markey as the companion and Parker Fennelly as the hired man, the drama captures the lightness of the early scenes of life on a Vermont hilltop and the mounting terror of the siege of the old lady that develops as the play faces realities. In the writing and in the acting "The Southwest Corner" never loses sight of the spiritual anguish of the well-bred old lady who is almost destroyed by an ill-bred opportunist.

All the action occurs in the kitchen of an old Vermont farmhouse. Although Ralph Alswang, the scene-designer, has made a few concessions to modern décor for old houses, he has caught the comfort and grace of a room that has been used for years. As the director, George Schaefer has preserved the integrity of the fable in a warm and intimate performance.

In the part of the old lady, Miss LeGallienne plays with great sympathy and insight. The unspoken part of the story is told in illuminating acting: the pride, independence and sweetness giving way to solitary panic and gaunt resignation to forces she cannot control. Miss Markey's acting of the companion is notable because she portrays the cruelty as unconscious. She is not villainous: she is insensitive.

Mr. Fennelly's hired man is a brilliant character study, not only because he has caught perfectly the inflections and rhythms of a cautious Yankee, but also because he shows a profound understanding of human values. Mr. Fennelly does not cheapen the theme with the amusing cant of stock ruralism.

All the acting is excellent—Ray Boyle and Jean Gillespie as young people; Frank Tweddell as a bustling auctioneer; Frieda Altman as a chirrupy city visitor. "The Southwest Corner" is a small play. But it has a big heart and deep understanding.

Note to household conservationists: Never leave the door open between a warm kitchen and a cold and drafty hall.

New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun
February 4, 1955

Holm Play Marked By Emotional Switch

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

John Cecil Holm has composed a sentimental excursion into high comedy and low tragedy in "The Southwest Corner," playing at the Holiday Theater.

The work was originally a novel by Mildred Walker. The play's chief difficulty is its contrasting emotional moods. Perhaps one can more easily accept entirely different attitudes toward people and their situations in the slower passage of a novel.

In the compact, rapid theater, a transfer from soaring, pungent wit to drenching agony must be absorbed too quickly for comfort.

The first part of the new play has dialog quite brilliant in its perception of New England taciturnity and humor. We can see an 83-year-old woman, last of her line, living happily alone in her ancestral home, attended by a loyal odd-job man.

Her pittance of remaining money promises short security. So the elderly woman suggests a companion, who will inherit her property as recompense for her care.

The rich comedy comes from the dry appraisal and resistance of the two natives toward the infant-brained newcomer.

As long as their relationship is amusing, one accepts it. But as the interloper, with power, turns monster the play becomes uncomfortable. The younger woman is so selfish, tactless and irritating that it is inconceivable the other two rock-ribbed souls would not get rid of her.

Instead, in a paraphrase of "Kind Lady," the boarder gets a will tucked into her pocket, marries the hired man and proceeds to sell out the old lady's house under her eyes, with the threat of leaving her.

By now starvation should be vastly preferable to further life with this baby-talking Medusa. But at the last minute she strains her heart in eager aid to the auction, and drops dead.

The Southwest Corner is a wing of the house adjoining, but separate, where the older generations have always retired. It is in her passionate insistence on cashing in its sacred furnishings that our villainess overdoes it all.

Eva LeGallienne stars in the play as the elderly former teacher, who loves her ghosts and her cat and learns to fear her new attendant. The play does not allow the star any great variety of emotion nor much rich buildup for her ancient few passions in life.

She is asked to totter about in aged tolerence. But it is remarkable what stature Miss LeGallienne suddenly achieves in sequences which come closest to soap opera.

Enid Markey progresses from the fascinating to the repulsive as the power-mad, ignorant wheedler. It is a resourceful performance that observes the deceptions of the plot with ingenious detail. But it ends needing a spotlight it never wholly gets.

Parker Fennelly is fine as the Down East yard man, eating pie on his hash and muttering monosyllables.

A fresh pair of young lovers are nicely played by Ray Boyle and Jean Gillespie.

New York Post

February 4, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

About a Woman Who Came to Stay

Do you remember a melodrama called "Kind Lady," in which a scoundrel preys upon a lonely old woman who had hospitably invited him into her home? Well, "The Southwest Corner," which John Cecil Holm adapted from a novel by Mildred Walker, is by way of being both a distaff and bucolic version of "Kind Lady," if I may oversimplify matters a bit. At the Holiday Theater last night, with Eva LeGallienne portraying the victim and Enid Markey the menacing interloper, I thought things turned out rather entertainingly in a modest sort of fashion.

Miss LeGallienne is the distinguished possessor of a kind of frigid stateliness, and you hardly tend to think of her as a woman readily to be bullied. Miss Markey, on the other hand, has a winningly scatterbrained quality in her acting, which makes it unlikely that you would be inclined to look upon her as a relentless persecutor of the helpless. It seems to me one of the virtues of "The Southwest Corner" as a show that it boldly switches types in its casting and lets you see Miss Markey scaring Miss LeGallienne virtually into madness.

Rural Type

Another distinctly pleasant feature of the evening is the playing of Parker Fennelly as a laconic Vermonter, if you'll excuse the possible redundancy, who is lured into matrimony by the selfish invader. Ever since he was the philosophical Titus Moody on Fred Allen's radio show, Mr. Fennelly has been recognized as the particular expert in engagingly comic rural types, and the remarkable thing about him is that he can still manage them with such fresh inventiveness. In Mr. Holm's play, he both helps carry on the plot and gives a most amusing show.

According to the narrative, Miss LeGallienne is an ancient lady living on a Vermont farm, who feels she has reached a time in life when she needs a 'woman companion. So she settles on Miss Markey, who seems a kindly soul and has a good recommendation from her minister. Beneath the companion's disarming exterior, however, there lurks the soul of a conniving monster, and it isn't long before she has driven the old lady into apparently abject submission. At the end, though, there is a triumph of virtue, and the old homestead is saved.

Final Scene

This final scene, it seems to me, is the weakest spot in the play. The ending, which has to do with the title and possibly shows a symbolic victory of the old lady's dead relations over her persecutor, should no doubt be kept a secret, since this is a suspense drama. But it did strike me that the overthrow of the tyrant might well have been more excitingly managed. Up to that point the combination of humor and suspense, allied with the entertaining work of Miss Markey and Mr. Fenneily, kept matters moving along agreeably.

I liked Miss Markey's work throughout, but I admired it especially in a scene where she insists hypocritically that she loves cats and manages to indicate by virtually a gesture that she utterly loathes them. Miss LeGallienne is authoritative and effective, but somewhat less subtle The play has little time for young love, but I thought Ray Boyle and Jean Gillespie, who represent this minor feature of the evening, handled their brief assignments with pleasant credibility. "The Southwest Corner" is no major dramatic work, but most of it is fun.

"The Wisteria Trees"

Daily Mirror

February 3, 1955

Helen Hayes Superb In 'The Wisteria Trees'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Helen Hayes made another triumphant appearance at the City Center Wednesday evening in Joshua Logan's "The Wisteria Trees." She had earlier delighted us there in Sir James M. Barrie's "What Every Woman Knows." Her performance as the Southern belle, overly emotional and utterly impractical, has taken on new and rich facets since she last did it on Broadway.

"THE WISTERIA TREES," as you may know, was based on Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." If, in transposing this saga of ineffectuality from Russia to Louisiana, Logan has lost a little of the original's stature, he has brought a cynical humor and immediacy for Americans to the work.

He has also given Miss Hayes one of her finest vehicles. As the flighty, heedless aristocrat who marries and later loves outside her own set, she is irresistible. The role permits her to be gay, sad, charming and witty. She even has an ingratiating little nursery song to do, and brings it off beautifully.

Walter Matthau is excellent as the "turkey-neck," who attempts to save the plantation, with its historic oaks and wisterias, for its mistress; and ruefully buys it for himself at auction, when the dancing, procrastinating aristocrats about him fail to do so.

FILM STAR Ella Raines is effective and admirably restrained as the Southern lady whom the competent and rough businessman would wed. Bramwell Fletcher has style as an effete, thin-blooded, gambling gentleman. Cliff Robertson has some moving emotional scenes as a mixed-up, sardonic philosopher and poet.

Lois Smith is pretty, and displays diction unusual for one so young, as Miss Hayes' daughter. Ossie Davis and Evelyn Davis are amusing standouts as a butler with a Parisian polish and a susceptible maid. Salutes also are due Will Geer, Alonzo Bosan and Jonelle Allen.

John Stix, one of Miss Hayes' discoveries, knows how to work in complete harmony with the star. This promising young director has given a roundness and depth to the play that make it absorbing theatre. The atmospheric settings and costumes by Herbert Gahagan and Lucinda Ballard are other assets.

To successfully paraphrase Chekhov, one of the drama's acknowledged masters, takes a lot of doing. It would be nothing less than impertinence had anyone less skillful a technician than Logan made the attempt. To his credit, he has achieved his purpose. He has given warmth, wit and humanity to a classic.

"THE WISTERIA TREES"

Play by Joshua Logan, based on Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard;" music selected and arranged by Max Marlin; staged by John Stix; setting by Herbert Gahagan; costumes by Lucinda Ballard; lighting by Feder; revived by the New York City Center Theatre Company (Jean Dalrymple director) at the City Center, February 2, 1955. The cast:

Dolly May.....Frances Foster
Martha.....Ella Raines
Henry Arthur Henry.....
Maurice Ellis
Yancy.....Walter Matthau
Scott.....Alonzo Bosan
Lucy Andree Ransdell.....
Helen Hayes
Antoinette.....Lois Smith
Cassie.....Evelyn Davis
Gavin Leon Andrew.....
Bramwell Fletcher
Bowman Witherspoon..Will Geer
Jacques.....Ossie Davis
Peter Whitfield...Cliff Robertson
Little Miss Lucy...Jonelle Allen
Gracie.....Brook Seawell
Frankie.....Christopher Snell
Child.....Patty Burke

DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

February 3, 1955

Helen Hayes and Walter Matthau Act 'Wisteria Trees' at Center

By JOHN CHAPMAN

To wind up its season of four play revivals, the New York City Center of Music and Drama offered us Helen Hayes last evening in "The Wisteria Trees." This play is Joshua Logan's Louisiana version of Chekhov's human comedy, "The Cherry Orchard."

Of the four revivals, Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life" has been far and away the best, but "Wisteria Trees" has its advantages. Chief of these, of course, is Miss Hayes, who now has a wider field for acting than she had in her other Center revival, Barrie's "What Every Woman Knows"—which is, if truth must be told, a quite maidenly sex comedy.

In the Logan piece about a frivolous woman who will not face the fact that she must abandon her once-fine southern plantation and give up her thoughtless way of living in order to make way for progress, Miss Hayes has considerable latitude for her talents. To me, these talents are innumerable and continually surprising. Whenever I watch this little lady I can't figure out how she does it—and I can think of no greater praise than this. I know all the tricks of many actresses, and when I'm onto the tricks the actresses may bore me. But Miss Hayes never bores me because she seems to have no tricks and appears always to be so artless.

Remarkable Voice

Last evening, seeing a play I'd seen before, I found myself listening not so much to the words of the plot as I was listening to the Hayes voice. It isn't a big voice and never has been; but in it is a variety of emotion and color and meaning that is unmatched on our stage today. This made for a pleasant evening.

There are other good elements in this revival of "The Wisteria Trees." Chief of them, I would say, is the playing of Walter Matthau in the role of the crude but honest man who represents progress—the man of efficiency and enterprise who brings to an end the old easy ways of southern plantation life. Matthau is one of our most able and intelligent actors, and I hope that one day soon he will find a role worthy of him.

Many other excellent players are in this nicely-staged revival. The venerable Alonzo Bosan again is on hand as the ancient family retainer who was so busy taking care of white people that he forgot to get himself freed from slavery. Bramwell Fletcher gives a good portrait of a played-out southern aristocrat, and Will Geer offers another of his picturesque character performances. Ella Raines, Maurice Ellis, Lois Smith and Cliff Robertson are some of the others giving able assistance to the incomparable Miss Hayes.

Journal American
NEW YORK

February 3, 1955

Logan Play Revival A Smash Success

By JOHN McCLAIN

JOSHUA LOGAN, a Southern young man, has recently been associated with such productive properties as "South Pacific," "Picnic" and, currently, "Fanny," but one has always had the conviction that his wish fulfilment as a creative theatre personality would stem from his talent as a writer on his own. Not long ago he made the big effort with a play called "The Wisteria Trees," based on Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," and it was not a signal triumph.

He should rejoice then, to know that it was revived last night, at the New York City Center Theatre, and in its present dimension is a shattering success.

Helen Hayes was the star of the original production, and is now re-creating the same role—yet with greater stature.

The script has not been revised, yet the entity comes into focus as it never did before. It is implausible to say that Miss Hayes has improved as an actress, but certainly the current casting and production is more explicit.

It is unfair to Mr. Logan and the other participants to draw a strict parallel between his play and Chekhov's. This is the story of the pride and folly and declining elegance of the old South, and if it follows the pattern of a similar decadence in old Russia the illusion is entirely coincidental.

"The Wisteria Tree," is an eloquent and moving consideration of the problems of an elegant Louisiana lady who has lived in a world of the past, and is unprepared to face the facts of a withered inheritance. She has made a shambles of her emotional life and now returns from Paris to the old southern homestead, with its wisteria trees, which has always remained in her thoughts as a bastion of final retreat.

But she has been unaware of the extravagance of a younger brother, or the pressure of population around the ancestral acres. Will she allow the place to be destroyed or agree to a marriage with the poor white who has bought it at auction?

The eminence of the present production, it seems to me, rests not only on Miss Hayes' lovely shoulders, but on the somewhat broader ones of Walter Matthau, who plays the local "turkey neck" who made good. This strong relationship, missing from the earlier production, gives power and impact to the story.

A similar stimulus is added by the brilliant performance of Bramwell Fletcher, as the charming and helpless brother, and Ella Raines, making a first and auspicious appearance on Broadway, as the poor relation. Other contributions of value are offered by Will Geer, Lois Smith, Cliff Robertson, Alonzo Bosan and Ossie Davis.

John Stix, the director, can be credited with a smooth and unostentatious job; and Herbert Gahagan's sets, wisteria trees and all, are wonderfully nostalgic. Lucinda Ballard has clothed everybody in the bright yet seamy luxuriance of the era.

This is the last show of the drama season at City Center and Jean Dalrymple, the director, and all concerned rate the old Navy signal—"Well Done."

New Triumph For Helen Hayes

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
February 3, 1955

THEATER

'The Wisteria Trees'

By WALTER F. KERR

Displaced Persons

IN the revival of "The Wisteria Trees," which opened a ten-day stand at City Center Wednesday, a romantic young poet stares at Helen Hayes and murmurs something to the effect that her presence "gives the old South one reason for existing." Miss Hayes gives "The Wisteria Trees" one reason for existing, too.

Again and again this obviously enchanted actress summons up, out of her own unique resources, images that strike fire. She wanders into a room, stares at it a moment, barely speaks a word, then sits at a toy piano and reminiscently pokes her way up the scale. In a moment a dozen past years in the room are evoked.

She leans against a window-frame, the dusty shutters opened to reveal her favorite vines in full bloom, and simply stares. Her lazy dreaming does more to recreate a vanished way of life than all the scenery put together. Out of nothing other than some mysterious intuition of her own, she leaps without warning from a chair and hurls herself blindly toward a man who is speaking unkind truths, her hands twisted together in an inarticulate plea.

The catalogue of invention could run on and on, and it may: it's easy to talk about the way Miss Hayes charmingly announces that "there is no fact that cannot be ignored," the way she tears up a cablegram with unexpected venom, the way she entrances some neighborhood children with a frog and a mouse and an idle little refrain.

But "The Wisteria Trees," which was given a mixed reception when it was first performed a few years back, remains a mixed bag of tricks. It is a fairly free adaptation of Anton Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," transplanted from nineteenth century Russia to nineteenth century Louisiana by the inventive—perhaps overly inventive—Joshua Logan. The transposition of time and place is not an unlikely one: the aristocratic South, disintegrating in spite of its tenacious dignity and genuine grace, is an apt enough background for the haughty, foolish, and pathetic gestures made by a handful of ineffectual characters. And Mr. Logan has made virtually no concessions to sleek showmanship along the way.

Yet the play is still a shadow-play, the characters a group of outlines done on tracing-paper. Though the environments match well enough, the things people do are not directly observed, freshly imagined. Each of the figures seems to be moved by an invisible hand, working at some distance: when a gambling blueblood kneels on the carpet to roll a pair of dice, he seems to be doing it not by instinct but by remote control. Reality is replaced by an echo—the plantation is not quite real, the mortgage is not quite real, the relationship of masters and servants is not quite real—and you come away, I think, with the sense that the play is finally as homeless as the people who pass through it. "The Wisteria Trees" lacks a vital nerve of its own.

In working to invigorate it, Miss Hayes has received some excellent, some indifferent, support. Ella Raines, in the severely limited role of a spinsterish housekeeper, suggests a prim and tight-reined anguish with quick authority. Bramwell Fletcher, given very little recognizable motivation for his alternating flurries of activity and indolence, plays with a cool and genial ease. And Cliff Robertson, as a serious-minded representative of the youthful new South, brings off one difficult passage—in which he remembers his childhood and his white and black mothers—with moving conviction. I also thought that Lois Smith, as a stubborn lass in pursuit of her love, and Alonzo Bozan, Ossie Davis, and Evelyn Davis, as a trio of family retainers, were all fine. Walter Matthau's new-rich landlord, on the other hand, seemed to me inexplicably violent, and I wasn't a bit surprised when he hurled his broad-brimmed straw hat right over the footlights (an obliging member of the audience hurled it right back).

Lucinda Ballard has dressed the company with impeccable taste, and the Herbert Gahagan setting—crystal chandeliers in a cracked-plaster room—is eminently suitable. There is one ghost too many in this haunted mansion, though, and it is Chekhov's. Helen Hayes does her stunning best to exorcise it.

The New York Times
February 3, 1955

Theatre: Helen Hayes at City Center

Logan's 'The Wisteria Trees' Is Revived

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HELEN HAYES is reappearing in Joshua Logan's "The Wisteria Trees," which is the last production in the City Center's winter series. It opened Wednesday evening.

People able to retain vital statistics for as long as five years will remember that "The Wisteria Trees" is an adaptation of Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." Having heard sages repeatedly declaring that the American South of a half century ago was identical with Chekhov's Russia of the same time, Mr. Logan decided to test the theory by removing Chekhov's garrulous characters to Louisiana.

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Not for the first time the sages were wrong. For the resemblance between Chekhov's twilight world and the post-bellum South turns out to be superficial. Mr. Logan's indolent Southerners are not the creatures of tumultuous emotions that Chekhov's characters are, and their respective attitudes toward slaves are quite unalike.

Note that Mr. Logan cannot dismiss his American counterpart of Firs as brutally as Chekhov does. Mr. Logan takes care of his old family servant in the last act. In "The Cherry Orchard" Firs is carelessly forgotten and left behind.

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This implies no criticism of either Chekhov or Mr. Logan. It suggests that Chekhov is a dramatist who wrote out of personal observations in a highly personal style; and the universality of his art is the universality of his mind. Russian and American characters are not psychologically identical.

"The Wisteria Trees" is an interesting drama for that reason, and we have Mr. Logan to thank for exposing an old piece of cultural cant. The story of his drama repeats the story of "The Cherry Orchard." The Andrée plantation is mortgaged to the last stick of furniture. Gavin Andrée, the amiable brother, is not decisive enough to save it. His sister, who has just returned from a long, reckless amour in Paris, is incapable of facing facts. Finally, a rude though successful business adventurer buys it at auction and proposes to cut down the famous water oaks and wisteria vines and cut the plantation up into small farms.

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All of it is absorbing. Some of it is affecting, particularly the party scene when the sale of the plantation is announced in the midst of the festivities, rather heartlessly by the triumphant purchaser. But it is seldom possible to believe that the indolence and incompetence and wooly mindedness of the Andrées are responsible for their disaster. The damyankees must have had something to do with it somewhere.

In a few days it is likely that the performance at the City Center will settle down into a finer design. Wednesday evening's performance was uneven. Probably Miss Hayes is not ideally cast as a profligate adventuress fresh from the fleshpots of Paris. Queen Victoria becomes her more beguilingly. But no matter what the part may be, Miss Hayes is a professional, and her Lucy Andrée has plenty of grace, charm, temperament and spontaneity.

Ella Raines as the lonely, melancholy spinster does not project boldly enough for the City Center stage. Her performance is a colorless one. As the aggressive land speculator, Walter Matthau is colorful enough, but his performance is without distinction. Cliff Robertson gives an excellent performance as the footless poet and student, and Lois Smith is excellent as Lucy's daughter.

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Alonzo Bosan is repeating his memorable performance as the crotchety old servant. As the servant with delusions of Parisian grandeur, Ossie Davis is again in fine fettle. Frances Foster is gay and lively as the coquettish maid. Bramwell Fletcher as the polished, ineffectual brother, and Will Geer as an amiable old neighbor perform their parts with character and intelligence.

Herbert Gahagan has provided a pleasant setting of a decaying mansion parlor. Under John Stix' direction, the performance will probably knit itself together in a few days. Wednesday evening, it was diffuse and ill-blended. It left the comparison between "The Cherry Orchard" and "The Wisteria Trees" inexact.